

The Hip Strip

When Howard met Ivy...

BY PAT ROXBOROUGH-WRIGHT
Editor-at-Large/Western Bureau

BRANDON HILL, St James

HE was 24, a young athletic headmaster, brash and determined to claim Ivy Tai, a petite 23-year-old half-Chinese. Her father, a successful merchant objected of course. But the young Howard Cooke who was to become Jamaica's fourth Governor General decades later, was not to be denied.

"I was not about to be stopped by anyone... I was hot and ready... my heart was on fire. I remember well the day I met her. I visited the school where she was teaching and when she came to meet us in a well-fitting green dress I took her by the hand, looked straight in her eyes and said 'I'm going to marry you,' he told journalists during an informal recording session at his home in Brandon Hill, St James on Tuesday.

"How did you respond?" the journalists wanted to know.

"I never said a word," laughed Lady (Ivy) Cooke.

She didn't need to. In those days actions spoke louder than words and within nine months the young couple became the first to be married at the chapel of the then MICO Teachers College where Sir Cooke had been specially trained to enter the teaching profession.

Armed with youthful energy, they relocated to Bell Castle, a small, humble community in Portland.

"Our friends thought we were mad to settle in what was then termed 'backa bush', but even though the physical situation was lacking... no toilet in the house, no running water... it was a paradise. We were among poor people and we were poor too, but it was lush and green and we decided that we were going to stay there," said Sir Cooke.

It certainly paid off.

Today at the age of 94 and 93 respectively, Sir Howard and Lady Ivy are celebrating their 70th wedding anniversary against a background of rich memories and solid achievements in the field of education among other endeavours.

"Seventy years... it's been quite a journey from Bell Castle to King's house... most interesting... you can't imagine what it was like," said Lady Cooke.

They remember well all the significant milestones — the birth of children Richard, Howard and Audrey; the



Sir Howard Cooke and wife, Lady Cooke
(Photo: Pat Roxborough-Wright)

scholarships they both gained to study at the University of London; the heated ideological conflicts — Sir Howard was an undiluted socialist who believed that the State was duty-bound to ensure equality for all men, Lady Ivy less so — and the historic swearing of Sir Howard as Jamaica's fourth Governor General in August of 1991, among others.

And as they told the story together, journalists hung on every word.

Most of all, they wanted to know how the couple kept the marriage in tact given his

heavy involvement in politics, religion, education and the Masonic movement.

"I can tell you how... my wife was in a position to look me straight in the eyes and say 'I don't agree with you. We loved one another, we were faithful to each other, we slept in the same bed all the time and everything was alright,'" he said.

"We've been through rough times of course but the journey has been spectacular... together we helped to level the playing field, so to speak...we opened up King's House, literally... for the first time,

school children, poor people could actually come inside to visit... it was remarkable," added Lady Ivy.

"Yes," Sir Howard chimed in. "You see, I grew up with a strong belief that Jamaica could only be changed for the better through upward social mobility for the people of Jamaica. For me, King's House was a symbol of that... we wanted the people of Jamaica to feel welcome there. So Lady Ivy set up a vegetable garden and we reformed the grounds," he recalled.

Today they're still able — from their spacious home in Brandon Hill — to entertain with the same hospitality that they used to extend from King's House.

And at the end of Tuesday's recording, journalists lingered on for the better part of an hour, laughing and chatting about everything — athletics, politics, love, you name it — over generous helpings of a delicious mix of mango and passion fruit juice, made specially for the occasion by Lady Ivy.